

# NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

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"The Old Wine Makers of California" — from the B. McGlynn archives

## ¡BORONDA! (Part V)

©1984 by Betty Lochrie Hoag McGlynn  
(conclusion)

When Lester Boronda returned from studies in Europe he was welcomed warmly by northern California's art community. Late in 1909 he brought his bride to Pacific Grove, and almost immediately the Hotel Del Monte Art Gallery invited him to exhibit his landscapes. The hotel's periodical, *The Del Monte Weekly*, on January 22, 1910, said that "Boronda's work is finding favor in Monterey and also in art shops of the city;"<sup>1</sup> also, that Lester had a commission for two decorative panels to be hung in the new Carnegie Library at Salinas. On April 6th the *Salinas Daily Index* reported that Lester had addressed a women's study group at the home of Mrs. Ben Graves (his aunt), giving his impressions of life in Bohemian Paris. "It is a matter of pride to his home people that he is achieving great success in his chosen profession." It should be noted that Salinas was becoming very art-conscious: a little later that month the same newspaper told about "copies of famous paintings" which would be shown in the high school. "The object of the exhibit is to give the people of Salinas an opportunity of seeing these fine pictures and at the same time to raise a fund for the adornment of the public schools." Little children went from door to door for weeks, selling 25¢ tickets for the coming cultural event, netting a profit of \$180. The following month the Southern Pacific Railway Company, not to be outdone, announced that it was donating "a big art collection" to adorn the public schools of Salinas. How important

that collection was can be gathered from its contents: photographs of such places as Yellowstone Park and the Yosemite. Only a few years later Sylvano and Maria Boronda would have every reason to feel pride in their son's contribution to the culture of their town: on November 9, 1919, the art critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote an article about increasing art appreciation in the State's schools and singled out,

... among smaller towns, Salinas, whose high school graduating class has formed the habit of purchasing each year a canvas from a California artist. The collection is growing to admirable proportions and this year the interest of the class has extended to asking for a loan exhibit of canvasses by the State's artists. The request has been met by the Del Monte Gallery ... and a collection comprising 35 small oils, watercolors, pastels, etchings and monotypes will open at the high school.

Two well-known California artists were reared near that little town, and though having achieved to some degree of fame in the larger centers, they have retained sufficient interest to donate pictures which formed the nucleus of the present group. They are Gottardo Piazzoni and Lester Boronda, and added to their works are now those of E. Charlton Fortune, M. de Neale Morgan, Clark Hobart and Detlef Sammann. The pictures for the holiday display are being assembled by Josephine Blanche, curator of the Del Monte Gallery, who also has been instrumental at various times in promoting the art interest which Salinas enjoys.

Throughout 1910 Lester Boronda was "one of the most industrious in the art colony at Monterey," *The Del Monte Weekly* reported on March 5th. He had been fortunate in selling some half dozen small sketches recently. Completed was a three-panel decorative mural to go over the fireplace of the new home of Miss Sarah Parke in Pacific Grove. On July 2nd the same paper noted that Boronda was "a sculptor as well as an artist" [*sic*], having completed a bust of his mother's uncle, Captain Albert Graves of Salinas, "one of the County's first sheriffs and a pioneer who came over the plains in 1848." The 20-inch high head was at this time being cast in bronze ("one of the first in Monterey County"), and was to go atop a 4-foot marble shaft marking the resting place of Captain Graves. Unfortunately, today there seems to be no record anywhere of this unusual piece of sculpture. Diligent search of all the Salinas cemeteries did not disclose even the grave of the old pioneer; this writer was assured that such a valuable piece of marble and bronze would have been stolen long ago if it *had* been left in a cemetery.

As a matter of fact, most of the work that Boronda did in the 1910-13 period is missing today. The Steinbeck Library in Salinas has no record of the panels which were to have been done for the old Carnegie Library. The staff let me search their record books but there was no mention of Boronda murals. Also the Parke overmantel decoration is gone. Possibly it was the "Arches of Mission San Antonio," an over-fireplace which was sold in 1951 from an exhibition of 17 Lester Boronda works at Oliver's Art Store, Monterey; name of the purchaser is not known. Nor have we any ideas about what happened to a large oil, "Pines of Pacific Grove," which was shown at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park Museum in September of 1910 ("one of the weather-beaten pines which line the shore near Point Joe, against a great white cloud in a blue sky").

In November of 1910 the St. Francis Hotel in the city hung 100 of Boronda's paintings and drawings. *The Del Monte Weekly* said on the 19th that "his Parisian sketches are filled with life, nobility and wonderful color; his Italian set speak of charm and poetry of the south; the Monterey collection have the quality that the Japanese are masters of, simplicity and grace." Photographer Arnold Genthe was not so rhapsodical: "The show was mostly sketches and studies from Italy and France, put down in



rapid, vibrant touches — but clumsy.” Lester’s friend Piazzoni called him “a colorist without affectation, his work frank and spontaneous,” adding condescendingly, however, that “Lester Boronda is still not mature, but going on the right road in the yet infant art of California.” *The San Francisco Daily Morning Call* praised the exhibit, noting that the St. Francis had purchased its largest work, a misty scene of Union Square in the fog. The paper added, surprisingly for this early date, “Some people think he is too Impressionistic.”

Lester Boronda was indeed fortunate in acquiring Miss Sarah Cornelia Parke as a patron and friend. She not only was a fine painter, but also a history-oriented person with a dedicated sense of civic service — and kindness of heart, as indicated at the time a street car repair crew broke down in front of her home; after watching the men struggle for some hours, Miss Parke primly stepped out her front door bearing a tray of coffee for them.<sup>2</sup> *The San Francisco Chronicle* on May 9, 1911, called her “an artist of wealth from Boston.” The reporter was a little off in geography but apparently right about her financial status. Sarah had been born July 13, 1891, in Upper Lake Superior country of Michigan, first of five children of Hervey C. Parke, a co-founder of Parke, Davis and Co., Pharmacists. In the early 1880s Sarah Parke studied art in New York with Otto H. Bacher, and later in Europe. She exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1892, and in 1904 won a silver medal for a landscape at the St. Louis Centennial Exposition. With an aunt, Sarah moved to Pacific Grove in 1906; they lived at Jewell Cottage, then at Home Inn on Forest Avenue before Sarah built a house at 270 Central.

Miss Parke and her friends were much involved in improving their already gorgeous environment. Typical of their projects was putting gravel paths at Lovers’ Point and planting California poppy seed there. Sarah belonged to the Ladies’ Civic Improvement Club and in January, 1907, the women voted to build “a new lookout on the west side of Forest Avenue, just inside the Pacific Grove Railroad reservation, since the removal of the old one is much missed.” This new location had a fine view of the ocean; in fact, a few days later the paper commented especially on a scene observed from that spot, “A spectacular rainbow hung over the dull gray-green surface of the water, delineated against a bright blue sky.” However, many residents living near the proposed new structure protested the invasion of their privacy, so the idea was postponed; someone suggested, instead, placing a lookout near the Japanese Tea Garden on Lovers’ Point.

These were the days when the magnificent Harry Greene was sprouting baby pine trees in old cans which he distributed to the schools, his dream being that every Pacific Grove child have, at least once in his lifetime, the thrill of planting a real tree. It earned him the nickname of “Tin Can Harry.”

Alex Underwood was interested in the continuity of local history. In January of 1910, while remodeling the Central Hotel which he owned, he found seeds over a century old, planted by the Franciscan fathers when they arrived in Monterey. Mr. Underwood knew that early builders had mixed the bunch grass with adobe to hold the mud blocks which made walls. By now the plants had entirely disappeared from the area, so the hotel man planted the seeds in an attempt to recreate the priests’ harvest. The results of his experiment are unknown.

For many decades a favorite subject of local artists had been the crumbling missions and early adobes. Their romantic appeal was in the same mood as Gertrude Atherton’s novels (nostalgic interpretations of California’s past) and poems by George Sterling (“The Dons long gone from our lands, etc.”). Sarah Parke belonged to a group of people taking a different look at Monterey’s history. For instance, Rowena Meeks Abdy’s husband Harry (“the dilettante journalist”) deplored the razing of the venerable Federal headquarters building in Monterey. On November 19, 1910, he of-

ferred his own and his artist wife's services to "design a plaque to be set in the wall of the new brick building erected on the site ... if someone will furnish him a complete history of the building." In the same mood, earlier in the year, the Monterey Civic Club had eyed the Old Theatre and considered restoring it. Before that could happen Sarah Parke began her project which, it appears, was the first restoration of an historic adobe in Monterey. Lester Boronda was the artist she chose to do the work.

Early in 1911 Sarah Parke returned to California from a trip to the Orient and the east coast. On May 5th *The Del Monte Weekly* headlined,

Picturesque Adobe to be the Studio of Pacific Grove Artist: The adobe owned by Maria Duarte de Muchado [sic], built over 100 years ago by Davie Catro [sic] ... was recently purchased for a studio by Sarah Parke. The house is beautifully located on one of the hills just beyond the old San Carlos Mission. Truly an inspiration to any artist will be this studio nestling on a grassy knoll, on one side the mountains over which drift the veil-like mists — on the other side, the sea, stretching its limitless distances, while nearby the hours are told by the music of mission bells.

For \$1000 Miss Parke bought the house from Mary Dutra Machado, who had inherited it from her mother, María Ignacia Cantrice Dutra. The Dutra family had called it home for the past 75 years.<sup>3</sup> The Barreto Adobe was noted for "having a happy relationship with the garden, as in the Larkin, Escolle and Soberanes adobes." Lester's remodelling was extensive. He added an attic story which was reached by an outside stairway. Far from traditional, a huge picture window was cut in one wall to bring light into Miss Parke's studio. However, it appears that she never resided in the house.<sup>4</sup> The Borondas lived there the last five months before they moved permanently to New York City in 1913. Lester and Ruby had spent the earlier days on the Monterey Peninsula in the home of a relative, Mrs. Abby. There a daughter, Beonne, had been born in 1911, and a son, Drew, the following year. The little family must have enjoyed the short stay in the Barreto Adobe. Sarah Parke later sold the place to Mrs. F.E. Robinson. Eventually the historical building was razed to give way to yet another medical building.

Miss Parke's involvement with history did not end with acquiring the Barreto Adobe. In 1914 she rented (and in 1917 bought) a building on the southeast corner of Polk and Hartnell.<sup>5</sup> Here she operated "The Adobe Gift and Tea Room" which had space for display of local artists' paintings. Later Sarah discontinued the tea room and added a book store to the gift shop. Her contributions to the community were many and varied. She was an avid supporter of the Episcopal Church in Pacific Grove. When Asilomar was built, Sarah contributed funds for it. Also she supported the Y.M.C.A. and the Pacific Grove Natural History Museum. Sarah Parke's last home on the Monterey Peninsula was in Pebble Beach, at Pescadero Point; she was always generous about allowing the mansion to be used for charitable functions. Miss Parke died on January 23, 1937.

The importance of the Parkes-Boronda collaboration was publicly acknowledged in the September 14, 1921, *The San Francisco Chronicle* which quoted a Special Dispatch from New York:

The paintings of old California life by Lester Boronda, the Pacific Coast artist who attracted attention some time ago by his restoration of the old adobe houses around Monterey, have established him successfully here in Greenwich Village ... The demonstration of his artistic ability in restoring the early Spanish adobe owned by Miss Sarah Parke, resulted in the taking over by others of some of the picturesque residences which had been threatened with destruction.



There is no doubt that part of Lester Borond's heart remained in California after he moved east in 1913, for he returned regularly almost every other year to spend his summers on the Peninsula, painting and visiting relatives and friends. He continued to have his work hung in the Del Monte Gallery, and as late as 1941 was still an active member of the Carmel Art Association. Bruce Porter well capsulized the situation of the young California artists in 1916:

The artists were playing the part of discoverers and prophets in the California environment and then, having prophesized — most of them went to New York. The material opportunities here were not frequent enough, that was all; California could not feed all her fledglings and they were crowded out of the nest, to sing or paint or carve their way to success or fame somewhere else ... Many have brought honor to the name of California. The sons and daughters of the state continue to seek and to pervade the older centers and to manifest their gifts in all the arts in almost embarrassing numbers.

One of the illustrations with Porter's article, Plate 78, is Borond's "Adobe Interior, Monterey," which features a beautiful Spanish girl.

In 1914 Lester Borond had a successful one-man exhibit of his Spanish California paintings at the prestigious Braus Gallery in New York. An important result was that the Braus stated afterward they planned to show more work by other people from the far west.

A few months later Lester decided to fulfill a lifetime dream and visit the land of his ancestors. He and Ruby packed up their three-year-old daughter and baby son and took a ship to France. The family spent a short time in Paris where it became obvious that it would be dangerous to continue on to Spain. The imminent outbreak of World War I found them fortunate to be able to book passage home on the S.S. *Potsdam*, a Dutch whaling boat which was not torpedoed.

To better support his family, Borond opened a picture framing business in an old cobbler's shop, deep in the heart of Greenwich Village. It was here that young Myron Oliver worked mornings during the years he attended the Art Students League. Lester continued to paint on the side and exhibit at the Braus Gallery. Eastern collectors were enthusiastic: late in 1914 he commenced a triptych mural commissioned by the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, and his preliminary sketches for it were sold "before the paint was dry." In December of 1914 the completed mural was part of a one-man exhibition held at the Rochester Memorial Museum. The following July Arnold Genthe wrote an article about Borond for the *International Studio*, and one of the illustrations was the St. Francis' triptych, "The Wine Makers of California." Genthe called it "a difficult composition woven into a charming and original pattern."<sup>6</sup> Of the artist, Genthe wrote, "He is one of the younger American painters whom we have to take seriously. He is an earnest worker of distinct originality, fitted in a remarkable manner, both technically and tempermanently, for carrying out what he considers his chief artistic mission: to visualize for us on canvas the charm and glamour of the olden Spanish days in California, now gone forever."

Borond's pictures continued to be in demand, but his frame shop also was very successful. He added the making of fine custom furniture. Two times he expanded his building to larger quarters, always increasing the number of helpers. Eventually he owned and operated The Firm of Beed, Inc., at 30 West 15th Street; it filled all four stories of one of the tallest loft buildings in New York City. All types of craftsmen produced objects of wood, wrought iron, copper and pewter. In addition to frame shops, there were specialists in restoring frames and furniture. In cabinet shops carpenters made refectory tables, chairs, beds, chests, screens. On the ground floor was a showroom where the Firm of Beed creations were on exhibit — ranging from radiator cap finials for automobiles to standing screens hand-carved in Renaissance designs. But

the top floor, the loft, was the most exciting part, what Lester called "our Blacksmith Shop in the Clouds." Like the set for a Wagnerian opera, here glowed forges, anvils rang, hot irons were beaten with sure hammers! Several American museums honored The Firm of Beed, Inc., with special exhibits, while meantime Lester Boronda continued to receive honors for his paintings.

In 1921 Lester and Ruby made an unusual trip: with both children and with both sets of grandparents, the Boronda family spent many months touring throughout all the United States, traveling by train, boat, automobile, whatever seemed most appropriate at the time. From this trip came a picture which Lester exhibited in the east that fall; its location today is not known, but one hopes that sometime it will be found because of its local interest: "The Thistle Burners of Monterey" shows the sweep of the hill overlooking Monterey Bay. It depicts the annual destruction of dry thistles."

In 1938 Lester visited old friends from school days at the Mark Hopkins, Gertrude and Tom McGlynn who lived in Pebble Beach. The "thank you" letter he wrote them afterwards reveals much about this sensitive man. He said he "would like to attend the 1939 fair (on Treasure Island), but am much more interested in the country between Salinas and Monterey;" and in a postscript, "I am busy now and then painting sycamores, oaks, etc., and it makes me homesick."<sup>7</sup>

Boronda did return to Monterey the summer of 1939 as a guest of Dorothy and Myron Oliver for six weeks before the opening of a very special event, an exhibit at the Del Monte Art Gallery. It contained Lester's landscapes and sculptures by his talented daughter, most of them little animals. Armin Hansen bought one of Beonne's figures, and that must have especially pleased her father.

It was also in 1939 that Beonne undertook the contracting for building a house which her father had designed for his lot at Mystic, Connecticut, a place where the family had long gone for vacations. The following year Lester's father, Sylvano, died on August 11th in Salinas. In his honor the artist gave the city of Salinas a representative collection of his paintings which can be seen today in the John Steinbeck Library. Shortly after that Lester closed his furniture shop and moved to his Mystic dream house where he could devote all his time to painting, and to his great hobby, sailing.

In 1952 the family again made a trip to Spain. However, as Beonne remembers it, her father never stepped off the gangplank at the Spanish port: going through customs Lester had some kind of argument and considered himself to have been insulted. The short-tempered artist stormed back into the vessel, announcing that he would never set foot on the soil of Spain! The journey was continued in Italy, France, England and Ireland, until 1953. On September 19th of that year Lester Boronda passed away after a stroke in New Canaan, Connecticut.

## Notes

1. Boronda regularly exhibited at the Rabjohn & Morcom Art Rooms, 240 Post St.
2. Spangenberg, p. 44, mentions the incident but does not give the source.
3. The adobe had been built by Fabian Barreto, a blacksmith from Guadelajara who came to Monterey in 1827 and built his home the following year, about 1/8 miles south of the Boronda Adobe. On April 11, 1833, he married the 33-year-old widow of José Castillo, María del Carmen Garcia, ninth of the 11 children of Felipe Garcia, one of the three master carpenters brought to San Diego by Father Serra in 1774 (to complicate his biography, Felipe had brought his mother on this trip; after she died a year later, he adopted her name of "Romero." Hence, his name appears in two forms!). On February 29, 1836, Fabian Barreto was granted



the Rancho El Pescadero which stretched from Seal Rocks to Carmel (most of the westerly part of today's Pebble Beach). Apparently it was at this time that he sold his house to the Dutra family and moved his bride to the ranch. Fabian only lived until 1841, when he was accidentally killed. Carmen, "by nature neither rancher nor widow, remained on the ranch and added another grant, Rancho Canada Honda (Dry Canyon) before marrying again on May 12, 1844, to Juan Madariaga ... In 1846 Mariá sold the rancho — more than 4,000 good acres — for \$500 and purchased ... a house in Monterey on a 90-foot lot." The Madariaga Adobe can be visited today on Abrego Street, opposite Casa Pacheco.

4. Photographs of the house and floor plans can be seen in the 1917 Jeans thesis. It is not known why he called Fabian Barreto "Joaquin Barreto."
5. Casa de la Torre was built about 1832 by Don José de la Torre who held the first Federal Court under Mexican rule in the adobe. Today it houses a law firm.
6. The central panel of the mural was a recent gift to the Monterey County Historical Association who have put it on permanent display in the Boronda Adobe, Salinas. The disposition of the side panels remains a mystery.
7. From the collection of Thomas A. Lee McGlynn.

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